

UK: Police attack refuse workers' picket in Wealden, England, arresting union officials

Robert Stevens
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Workers must demand the dropping of all charges against three GMB trade union officials who were arrested last Friday in a blatant attack on the right to strike.

The arrests took place as a strike by around 40 refuse workers against waste management firm Biffa, in Wealden, East Sussex, entered its fourth week. They are striking at the company's East Sussex Joint Waste Partnership depots at Hailsham and Uckfield. The sites provide domestic waste disposal for around 70,000 homes in the district overseen by Conservative Party-run Wealden District Council in Sussex.

Most of the workers earn less than £10 an hour. They are demanding pay rises for an hourly rate of £12.50 for loaders, £14.50 for Light Goods Vehicle drivers and £17.50 for HGV drivers.

The pickets were protesting peacefully in a lawful industrial action at the Amberstone depot in Hailsham when, according to the GMB, a “dozen police arrive with at least 3 vans” and arrest three officials. Videos circulating on social media show the men being handcuffed on the picket line before being led away by police officers.

The GMB officials were arrested under the 1980 Highways Act on suspicion of “obstructing the highway” in the course of asking strike-breakers not to cross their picket line. The GMB's Sussex Branch B50 said in a statement on Saturday that among the scabs was “a manager driving a vehicle who GMB and the strikers believe does not have the correct paperwork to drive the vehicle he was in.” GMB senior organiser for Southern England Charles Harrity said, “This is a serious health and safety risk for GMB members on the picket line he was crossing and the general public. The licence violation was reported to the police.”

The GMB statement said, “We are pleased to confirm that Gary ‘Picket Palmer’ & his fellow detainees were

released last night although unfortunately they were charged under section 137 (1) of Highways Act 1980, bailed to appear in court in Hastings on 29th June.”

The statement by Sussex Police read, “Pickets or assemblies in trade disputes are not immune from criminal law and police have powers at their disposal to respond to any issues or breaches of the peace, including any offences of blocking the highway.

“When police arrived at the scene, a number of persons were blocking the highway. The officers repeatedly asked those involved to clear the highway, but some failed to comply.

“A 63-year-old man, 62-year-old man and 55-year-old man have all been arrested on suspicion of obstructing the highway and remain in custody at this time.”

The Highways Act was introduced by the Thatcher government in 1980—one of its first major pieces of legislation aimed at suppressing the right to strike. It has been routinely used against pickets and protests. Under “Obstruction of highways and streets”, section 137 of the Act reads, “Penalty for wilful obstruction (1) If a person, without lawful authority or excuse, in any way wilfully obstructs the free passage along a highway he is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine not exceeding £50.

“(2) A constable may arrest without warrant any person whom he sees committing an offence against this section.”

The *Informed Dissent* website notes, “‘Obstruction’ includes anything that prevents passing and re-passing along the highway. To be committing this offence, you don't have to be blocking the whole width of the highway. This is because the offence is obstructing the highway itself (and not other users of the highway). The prosecution, therefore, do not have to prove that anyone was actually obstructed, but instead that you obstructed the highway itself.”

The website, which provides volunteer legal advice to

activist groups, explained, “If you are found guilty of this offence in court, the maximum penalty is a fine of £1000. First time offenders are likely to receive about £200 or a conditional discharge.”

The Highways Act was implemented the same year as the Employment Act which restricted lawful picketing to those attending at or near their own place of work. A Code of Practice issued under the Act recommended that six pickets should be the normal limit on a picket line.

The police attack on the refuse workers’ pickets was a conscious political decision under conditions where the strike was having substantial impact, with rubbish piling up. The police will have consulted with senior Conservative Party politicians. In a statement following the police operation Wealden District Council said, “following intervention by the Police today to enforce lawful access to and from the depot, which had until now been blocked by the picket line, Biffa have been able to operate two rubbish collection rounds in the southern half of the District today.”

Simon Hester, chair of Hastings and District trades union council, told *Socialist Worker*, “A number of GMB full-time workers and I were blocking vans from leaving the depot. We knew Friday would be a stand-off because the council had recalled all the vans to the Amberstone depot on Thursday.

“Vehicles were in line waiting to leave the depot, and I was in front of the trucks. They sent officers to deal with pickets. When the chief inspector arrived, he said we would be arrested for blocking a highway.

“He also made it clear that we needed to stop blocking vans because public pressure on the council to clear the streets of rubbish was starting to mount.”

Just two days earlier, talks between management and the GMB broke up with the company refusing to back-down despite the union offering “major concessions”.

The local Argus news site reported that the company was prepared to offer a pay deal of “up to 17 percent this year” and a £600 one-off payment that would be performance-related. The offer was rejected by 97.8 percent of the workforce in a vote the following day, with the GMB announcing the strike would continue to at least June 11.

In its statement on Saturday, the GMB explained, “At ACAS [mediation] talks on Wednesday this week, GMB made a counteroffer to Biffa to settle the dispute, which included major concessions however that was rejected by the company so the dispute will continue.” Despite the rejection of its offer and the intimidation and treatment

meted out by police on the picket line, the union added, “GMB remains ready to return to talks; anytime, any place, anywhere...”

The role of the unions in dividing workers is seen in the actions of the other union involved in the Sussex dispute, Unison. Putting pressure on the strikers this week, Biffa management was able to declare that Unison ensured that its members accepted the same deal as that which the company put on the table in Wednesday’s talks.

The strike in East Sussex is one of many disputes that have broken out among refuse workers nationally over the last year in pursuit of better pay and conditions. But the unions have worked to block a united offensive against the local councils and private corporations involved, with workers left to fight alone.

The attack on Biffa waste workers coincides with a strike-breaking operation organised by Coventry council against HGV bin lorry drivers. The Coventry drivers have been on strike for 21 weeks after walking out on January 5. They have confronted a Labour Party council scabbing operation via Tom White Waste Ltd, an arms-length but council-owned waste management company. The operation has cost the council over £4 million to date, such is their ruthless determination to defeat the strike.

The refusal of the unions to mount any serious opposition to such brutal strikebreaking has laid the basis for stepped-up repression, this time directly via the police.

It is no coincidence that the Wealden attack came just one day after Chancellor Rishi Sunak felt forced to announce minor measures to address the cost-of-living crisis. The ruling class fears a social explosion.

Just days before, 40,000 rail workers—guards, platform and ticketing staff, track maintenance workers and signallers—voted almost 90 percent in favour of strike action in defence of jobs, pay and conditions. In the lead up to the strike vote announcement, Conservative Transport Minister Grant Shapps warned that his government will legislate to ban rail strikes unless minimum service levels are maintained. The proposed laws are modelled on Spain’s “essential services” anti-strike legislation inherited from Franco’s fascist dictatorship.



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